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ABSTRACT

Today, with the influx of media production courses across the country, students can intimately experience the differences between acting for the stage and acting for the screen and learn to shape their performances for a two-dimensional image. Such a course in video and film acting was introduced at the University of Arkansas. Students enrolled for three hours of credit and met twice a week for an hour and a half, with the television studio available outside of class as needed. The thrust of the course was commercial in tone and practical in execution. Students performed monologues and dramatic duets selected from realistic plays, delivered commercials and public service announcements, and acted in films scripted by the student directors under the instructor's supervision. Theorizing was kept to a minimum. Discussion is given to the organization and content of the course, and to the tentative solutions to several problems that arose. (HOD)

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# Acting for Television and Film: A Collaborative Process

A Multi-Media Presentation

By

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# Acting for Television and Film: A Collaborative Process

by

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At one time or another, every stage acting instructor has been asked to describe the differences between acting for the stage and acting for the screen. Until recently, most students had to be told that television requires restrained performances, and that films are shot out of sequence. Today, however, with the influx of media production courses across the country,[1] students can intimately experience the distinctions themselves and learn to shape their performances for a two dimensional image.

Such a course in video and film acting, designed to integrate the skills of students in drama and media production, was introduced on the Fayetteville campus during the spring semester of 1980. The following discussion outlines the organization and content of the course, and examines tentative solutions to several problems which arose.

Because of the inaugural nature of the course, only students I had directed personally in major productions, or who had completed one of my acting classes, were invited to enroll. In being familiar with

their progress as actors, I felt continuity and rapport could be maintained to our mutual benefit. To insure a high level of technical competency, only graduate students recommended by a colleague in the Film Program, were asked to participate. Nineteen students eventually completed the course, with four emphasizing directing.

The production facilities were modest. The television studio, 24' x 35' in size, contained lighting and sound equipment, and two Sony B&W AVC 3200 video cameras on dolly tripods. One switcher and three monitors were housed in an adjoining control room separated from the studio by a bank of glass windows. Unfortunately, due to recurring mechanical difficulties, our production facilities lacked video editing capabilities. All video sessions had to be taped continuously. The filmmaking apparatus consisted of four Super-8 sound cameras and minimal film editing equipment. Each director was provided with twenty minutes of film stock purchased by the department. Students enrolled for three hours of credit and met twice a week for an hour and a half, with the studio available outside of class as needed. TV Acting: A Manual for Camera Performance served as the text.[2]

The thrust of the course was commercial in tone and practical in execution. Students performed monologues (30-90 seconds) and dramatic duets (3-5 minutes) selected from realistic plays, and delivered commercials and public service announcements (PSAs). They also acted in films scripted by the student directors under my general supervision.

Theorizing was kept to a minimum. After a brief orientation to the mechanics and terminology of video production, the students presented 30 second monologues of their choosing. One video camera was used. To illustrate how the framing of a shot affects an actor's performance, I

asked the student directors to incorporate a variety of full, waist, head and shoulder, and close-up shots. In order to record shifts in interpretation within the same performance, and to capture the accompanying adjustments in posture and facial expression, I asked several actors to make changes in tempo, emphasis, and vocal pitch.

After adjusting to the shock of seeing themselves on the video monitor, reconciling how they looked with how they thought they would look, the students began to objectively analyze their performances. Few performances were judged credible in their entirety. Even though the video lens brought the audience to a point only inches from their faces, many actors were still playing to the back of the house. Excessive and repetitious gestures appeared unnatural and melodramatic. Animated facial expressions were transformed on the monitor into a collage of facial ticks, gaping mouths and lolling tongues, all of which made it difficult to follow the content of the monologues.

The students began appreciating the need for restraint and selectivity, for while the slightest blinking of an eye might be lost to a theatre audience, the same movement in close-up can make a meaningful impact on a video audience. Conversely, the back of a hand wiped across the mouth may brilliantly underscore an action on the stage, but when executed for the screen may entirely obliterate an actor's face.

Interestingly, some actors consciously reduced the number and size of their gestures and facial expressions. Inadvertently, however, they also scaled down the intensity of their delivery, resulting in monochromatic performances devoid of energy which caused the performer to virtually disappear from the screen. Mentally and emotionally they had withdrawn from the lens in an attempt to cushion themselves against

the personal anxieties such close proximity can often generate.

With regard to the experience of performing in front of a camera, most students admitted to being highly nervous and insecure. Having come from an environment where they, the sets, and the audience shared the same three-dimensional space, they were suddenly alone in a room which did not contribute to their performance. They found themselves surrounded by tripods, sound booms and seemingly disinterested technicians who didn't look at them but, instead, peered into small view finders. To add to their frustration, they had to deliver lines into a camera lens for an audience they couldn't see or hear. Confused, they didn't know where to focus their mental concentration and visual attention. They invariably rushed their delivery, tensed their voices, and seemed unaware of those nuances of meaning which texture any performance. Intuitively, they were escaping from what they felt was a hostile environment.

This first assignment made abundantly clear that all production decisions are made for the sake of the image. The challenge for the actors, then, was to maintain their ability to analyze and interpret a script while working in concert with the technical restrictions, so the image would reflect credible, restrained, and organically integrated performances.

The next class exercise emphasized commercials and PSAs, and utilized two cameras. The students were obliged to physically incorporate the product into their delivery--hold it, point to it, and so on; visual aids were optional for the PSAs. The assignment required the actors to hit their toe marks, look at the appropriate camera, negotiate the product, maintain their enthusiasm, and relate sincerely to the

camera-audience. Having selected a series of shots favoring the actor and the product, the directors had to call each shot, which the camera operators had to frame and focus, and make smooth transitions from shot to shot -- all in 30 seconds. As the sessions progressed, I suggested alternate attitudes and rhythms for the actors, and asked the directors to make adjustments in their framing.

The presentations ranged from selling sausage, toiletries, and jeans, to asking the audience to contribute to the Christian Childrens Fund and support the Girl Scouts. Although they occasionally covered labels with their thumbs, most of the actors achieved a higher degree of honesty than they had attained while delivering the monologues. They began holding their heads still, coloring key words, and using economical gestures, all of which allowed the audience to absorb what was being said while observing the product in use.

The most distinctive improvement was made in the area of credibility. Several students indicated that scaling down their work also served to calm their anxieties. They felt more comfortable in the studio and could expend energy in creating a mental picture of the person who needed to know about the benefits of the product, or the person for whom the PSAs' emotional appeal was intended. Concentrating on the mental image of the audience also served to constructively keep out those production distractions which had sabotaged the earlier monologues.

In a few instances, actors still remained transfixed in front of the camera. The lines were there but there was little animation, warmth or sincerity. On these occasions, I placed a fellow student directly behind the camera and asked the performer to focus attention directly

on the student, as if sharing an intimate, personal opinion. After several rehearsals devoted to bringing facial expressions, gestures, and vocal pitch into closer alignment with the "image" of the product or the tone of the PSA, the surrogate audience member left the studio. This time the performer delivered the commentary directly into the camera. In a majority of instances the warmth, humor, or sincerity generated in front of the classmate was transfered satisfactorily to the video audience.

Since credibility plays such an important role in casting for commercials, as well as for television dramas, this assignment also served as a realistic introduction to the concept of "type" casting. Documentary-like in its ability to dispassionately chronicle what it sees, the lens can painfully record the absurdity of a twenty year old girl selling denture cream or acting the lead in Medea. Make-up is of little or no help to the young actor because most producers are reluctant to spend money and time applying wrinkles to a smooth face when they can hire a performer with a face like a road map. More importantly, stage actors may have up to three hours in performance to delineate the fine shadings of a character, while an actor in a commercial has only a few seconds to make a contribution. It is the actor's personality that makes the impact as "character".

Looking objectively at the size and shape of their bodies, the contours of their face, and the quality of their voice, the students began to discover their type. Were they the "friendly grocer", the "frumpy housewife", or the "young executive"? Also, working in pairs, each student analyzed the other from a casting director's perspective, listing the partner's physical attributes and the corresponding types

they suggested. We extended the exercise further by examining the students' video personae. Who could sell Liquid Plumber, give Mrs. Olson a run for her money, play the brittle socialite, or chill our blood as the demented killer? Over 90% of the class agreed in their casting decisions.

Following the self-inventory assignment, the students presented short monologues or commercials that favored their type. Additionally, to illustrate how their range could be expanded--by changing vocal pitch, adding a pair of glasses, or restyling their hair--they also selected pieces which went counter to their primary type. Both presentations were more sharply etched than any delivered previously. Working from type gave the actors a sense of shape and direction, and intensified their point of view toward the product or the essence of the character being portrayed.

At this point in the course, the tempo quickened. The students felt more comfortable with the production process, had been in front of the camera several times, and were beginning to exercise good judgement regarding selectivity, restraint, and concentration. The next exercise served to introduce them to the problems of working in ensemble relationships.

A thirty second scene between Dr. Gannon and Nurse Wilcox, excerpted from a Medical Center teleplay, was passed out to the class. Unemotional in tone, and containing an awkward phrase or two, the scene primarily served to progress the plot. Dr. Gannon, involved in an intrigue that requires his absence from the hospital, contrives to go on "vacation". He approaches the nurses' station. Nurse Wilcox is typing. Gannon hands her a letter which she is to give Dr. Lochner the following Friday.

Friday? asks Wilcox, registering confusion. Gannon explains he wants to be undisturbed but may need transportation to return to work. The letter contains instructions as to his whereabouts. Gannon exits, and Wilcox closes with "And drop me a card. I love to get mail from glamorous places."[3]

The set contained a chair, a desk and a working typewriter. While the actors worked independently on their lines, a director and I blocked out the scene using two cameras. We decided to open with a close shot of Wilcox typing at her desk, then cut to a two-shot when Gannon approached. As Gannon sat on the front edge of the desk we would cut to a two-shot from a different angle to provide variety and help Wilcox share the scene. At this point, with two cameras working, several tighter shots were selected which separately favored Gannon and Wilcox. One camera would hold the action in view while the other camera was framing the second shot. Toward the end of the scene we would go back to a two-shot to catch Gannon rising from the table and exiting camera right. The director could either cut on the action, capturing Gannon's rise and exit in two separate shots, or stay with Wilcox as Gannon crossed out of the frame. We closed the scene with a zoom into Wilcox's face as she rose to her feet, said her last lines, and tagged the scene by looking quizzically at the envelope.

The task in the scene was to make the information clear to the audience, but a rhetorical stance had to be avoided. The students were free to bring a variety of attitudes to the scene, but had to stay within the general tone created by the original series. Some of the actresses played the scene as if secretly in love with Gannon, others portrayed a "good buddy" attitude, while other interpretations presented them as

solid and efficient nurses who would hold down the feet. The actors ranged from playing Gannon as jovial and hearty, to reserved and business like.

Although the actors were required to follow the same blocking, variations in business were permitted. A few of the actresses played the duet with glasses, taking them off after Gannon entered and then replacing them to glance at the envelope. Several actors wore sport coats or doctor's gowns and reached into their pocket for the envelope. Others made notations on clip boards before writing Dr. Lochner's name on the envelope and handing it to Wilcox.

In the first several performances, the energy was low, the lines were flat, and the cue pick-ups were inordinately slow. Each performer was waiting, in effect, for the other person to carry the scene. Often an actress would play against several Gannons but would perform in the same manner, impervious to the variances in tone, energy, and presence unique to each interpretation of Gannon. In some instancaes, even with little dialogue and seated in a weakened position, an actress would dominate the scene. Her intensified point of view overshadowed Gannon's generalized attitude, one which arose from the erroneous assumption that the sheer number of his lines would create the stature he needed.

Interestingly, even the speed and precision Wilcox put into her typing told the audience a great deal about the spirit and personality of the character, as well as providing an in-scene tempo source for the actors' interchange. Where the actress could not type, the scene was dead before it began, for each painful peck displayed the insecurity of the actress--not the character.

The assignment also illustrated the fact that an actor's personal comfort is often subjugated to the needs of the image. The actors had

to violate their private space in order that the spatial relationship on the screen appear normal and comfortable. To give the impression of talking directly to the video Wilcox, an actor in the studio sometimes had to talk to the actress's furthest shoulder. Similar adjustments were required in subsequent duets in which students held coffee cups tucked under their chins, or sat on telephone books out of the frame to raise them up to eye level with their partner--all because it looked natural on the video screen.

With this initial experience to draw upon, the students performed a series of scenes throughout the remainder of the semester from such plays as All About Eve, Summer and Smoke, The Sea Horse, The Boom-Boom Room, and The Shadow Box. While most of the duets were taped outside of class, rehearsals were occasionally scheduled during class to allow the other students to observe the process as I worked with directors and their casts. When needed, the scenes were taped again after class critiques. A variety of tables, chairs, sinks, sofas, and props serviced the needs of all the exercises.

The filmmaking portion of the course, withheld until the foundation of media performance had been established in the studio, was now introduced to the class. In a meeting with the directors, held three weeks prior to filming, I stipulated that the first film should emphasize a pursuit theme. The chase did not have to be resolved, but there had to be a confrontation between the major participants. The film had to favor the actor in a variety of locales, and had to incorporate multiple shots and camera angles. They could write their own dialogue, but were urged to keep it simple and minimal, and were free to select their own locations. In short, I wanted the directors to struggle with the problems

of duplicating the slickness of a Rockford Files episode. The chase could be physical, cops and robbers, or it could evolve from interior conflicts such as a lovers' quarrel. The intent was to put the actors in an essentially non-verbal situtation quite distinct from the structured dialogue-work they were undertaking in the studio.

The four directors, all of whom had successfully passed a flim-making course, were given 100 feet of Super 8 film stock--six minutes and 40 seconds of screen time. While subsequent projects could employ sound, the first effort could be either silent or sound. I asked that the directors stay as close to a shooting ratio of 2:1 as possible to encourage them to make certain each shot contributed to the film. Between 3-4 actors were assigned to each director, and ten days were alloted to complete the shooting. Camera crews were recruited from among the actor ranks, from fellow directors, and from outside the class.

When the rushes were screened, it became obvious that most of the directors had prepared too little, and had attempted too much. Free to exercise their talents as "filmmakers", they had elected to dispense with conventional story telling continuity in favor of displaying a propensity for self indulgent gimmickry. Bloody faces, raped women, self conscious posturing, and vertigo-like camera angles assaulted the viewer. In their desire to showcase their virtuosity, they became enamored with the fact that they could shoot anything they wanted. Without the constraints and creative decisions provided by a play script, and inclined to incorporate the spontaneous suggestions of their peers, the directors had become victims of the very options they had so eagerly sought.

The actors, without a clear sense of continuity or motivation, were confronted with a series of disconnected shots that asked them to simply gaze out a window, run helter skelter down a public sidewalk, swig from a liquor bottle, or scream hysterically into the camera. They frequently voiced the opinion that they felt more like objects or props, to be used as mass, line, or form, instead of as actors whose specific presence in the film made a unique difference.

The edited versions, of course, showed the actors how their disconnected actions made clearer sense when placed in juxtaposition with other shots. The basic directorial flaws mentioned above, however, were still evident. The critique sessions at this point were aimed at helping the directors tighten their films by incorporating cutaway and insert shots, and substituting more subtle and restrained images for the more blatant "see how clever I am" shots. In the films that followed, the directors exhibited a greater ability to work more precisely with regard to shot selection and continuity, and communicated more openly with their actors.

The last third of the semester was completely devoted to taping and filming. Malfunctions continued to plague the class, and several of the remaining duets had to be taped with only one camera. What first appeared as a liability emerged as a blessing. The directors discovered artful ways of moving the actors within the frame, deftly blending zoom, pan and dolly shots to condense and simplify the action. These duets represented some of the directors' best technical work.

The final exam required the actors to perform a duet and present three short pieces--monologues, commercials, and PSAs--with only ten seconds between each selection. Two weeks were devoted to taping the

final projects. By the end of the semester, 22 duets and over 85 individual commercials, PSAs, and monologues had been taped. Six Super 8 films, some utilizing up to seven actors and running from 4-10 minutes in length, also had been shot and edited.

While much was accomplished in the course, its evolution did not progress without complications. Scheduling problems were plentiful. Because many students were acting in stage productions, or directing fellow actors in directing class projects, it was difficult to assemble directors, switchers, camera operators, and actors at the same time. Also, as final assignments came due in the studio, the warming spring weather seduced the directors to take advantage of exterior locations.

Compounding this problem was the fact that I overestimated the work load the four student directors could reasonably assume. While devising a series of head, waist, pan and zoom shots can be exciting and fun, it also consumes an enormous amount of time. In the future the directors will meet before the course officially begins and tape short exercises which should aid them in making quicker and more competent decisions. Also, the Gannon-Wilcox scene will be taped earlier in the course. This should allow students to become familiar with the camera and switching apparatus, thus creating an in-house pool of technician talent, and should aid them in developing a deeper appreciation for the technical difficulties a production generates and the time it takes to overcome them.

The number of contact hours will also be adjusted. A three hour lab, meeting one afternoon each week would allow time for screenings, exercises, rehearsals and taping. The three hour lab could also be used to shoot location footage. To compensate students for the extra

class time beyond the two one and a half hour meetings, the course could carry four or more units of credit.

The lack of communication between directors and actors also frustrated the process. Media production students tend to become obsessed with the condition of the image--is it well composed, in focus, lighted correctly? In short, does the picture look good? They fail to notice bland line readings, confused points of view, erratic rhythms, and the actors' failure to maintain energy and concentration throughout extended takes. More importantly, they don't have the vocabulary to guide the actor in the proper direction. The directors also make arbitrary shot selections based on a need to give the audience a variety of angles. They fail to understand that shots must propell the action, underscore a line, create tension, or reveal a perceptive non-verbal reaction.

While the directors concern themselves with camera placement, cross-fades and tilt shots, the actors feel adrift. They have been accustomed to the mutual exploration into motivation, background and character relationships they have shared with a stage director. Yet, once the taping commences, it is their turn to display the decisions they should have been making while studio time was spent on essentially non-actor demands or needs.

←— Their experience, of course, is remarkably similar to that which television players confront daily. Some may never meet their colleagues until the day of shooting. And seldom do they have the leisure time to explore a character's full dimension. They have to center their character physically, determine a point of view, memorize lines which frequently have been rewritten since their agent gave them the script, and engage with "strangers" in a natural, confident, and harmonious manner. To top

it all off, the director may only appear for the runthrough and final taping.

In the future the Gannon-Wilcox scene will be utilized to impress the actors with their need to explore self sufficiency with regard to character analysis. For the directors, I would strongly advise taking a course in stage direction to learn how to talk to actors in terms and concepts that will aid in creating three-dimensional performances. Also, they would be exposed to the tasks of analyzing a scene, integrating character relationships, and devising appropriate business which, in harmony with the appropriate shot, could illuminate the character relationship and look good on the screen as well.

The filmmaking problems previously mentioned can be solved partially by withholding some of the control the directors claim they want. As much as cinema students are smitten with the idea of becoming "auteurs", they do not possess the shaping hand necessary to keep all aspects of the production in alignment. The first assignment should probably be typed out, scene by scene, with all the necessary dialogue provided. The director's task, then, would be to shoot a slick version of the script and work with the actors to establish a through line of motivation. On the longer films I would ask for modified step outlines, and a complete shooting script. Also, when feasible, film adaptations of short stories might suffice quite well. In all instances, the overriding concern would be to insure plot continuity. Lastly, it would be advantageous to have a few production students emphasize video work throughout the course, thereby keeping the studio functioning during film assignments for those who might elect to favor television work after their initial film experience.

Oddly enough, enthusiasm also created problems. As products of an age dominated by media images, most of the students were eager to digest all they could in order to make themselves more marketable. Also, since this was the first course of its kind, I was anxious to help them make up for lost time.

Because of our combined exuberance, however, a situation developed where the more aggressive actors began to secure more performance time by volunteering to do additional scenes or filling in for students who had commitments elsewhere. Increasingly, my critiques focused on those actors whose work I saw. Consequently, the less aggressive students, who had failed to secure sufficient rehearsal and performance experiences, felt a fair share of my individual attention had been denied them. While it can be said that pressure and speed tend to separate the aggressive from the more passive actor, I feel the essential educational experience for the student was short circuited. In the future more criticism needs to be directed evenly to all the students, with the more recessive student assigned scenes specifically tailored to challenge skills in such a manner that the student will participate more fully in the course.

The benefits of such a class can be observed on several levels. The students exhibit a deeper respect for detail, nuance, and restraint, traits which happily appear in their stage work as well. Their personal involvement in the studio and on location enhances their appreciation of the contribution the technician and the actor, in harmony, make to the media production process. On a practical level, some of the actors who never seem to possess the presence necessary for stage work are encouraged by the fact that their appearance on the screen commands attention.

Regardless of the benefits, however, there are few courses in the

country that are specifically designed to put the actor in front of the camera. The major obstacle appears to be the absence of superior facilities. Let me stress that our equipment was antiquated, cumbersome, and caused undue frustration. The tripods were too light to effect a smooth dolly shot, but adjustments were made. The editing equipment failed us, so we learned to cue the actors and the technicians so that scenes running several minutes in length could be taped without a break. Newer equipment many times becomes a barrier to imagination and creative invention. Students unconsciously rely on the apparatus instead of themselves. Some of the best work, as mentioned before, came out of the scenes shot with only one camera. The technicians and the actors had to refine their decisions, simplify their movements, and focus their energies more intently on establishing a clear point of view. Newer equipment may put the actor's face in sharper focus, and may even paint him in living color, but there is no guarantee that his acting will automatically improve.

It also should be noted that the instructor does not need to have a thorough command of the technology. Production colleagues and accomplished student assistants can ably shoulder much of the burden. What is crucial is to encourage, challenge, and direct the students in their efforts to shape performances for the screen. Without the energy and vision of the instructor, the course can quickly disintegrate into little more than play time for the students. As the producer for the course, the essential task for the instructor is to establish a working rapport among all the elements and personalities involved, enabling the collaborative process to yield the growth and awareness all of us seek to achieve.

## Footnotes

[1] In a recent survey of 1067 schools throughout the country, the American Film Institute determined that over 9000 courses are offered in the area of film and television, with 33% of the film, and 64% of the television courses emphasizing production.

[2] Hindman, James, Larry Kirkman and Elizabeth Monk. TV Acting: A Manual for Camera Performance. New York: Hastings House, 1980. The American Film Institute/Education Newsletter, Vol. 3, No. 4, 1980, also contains a TV-Film acting syllabus compiled by Will Bellais. A syllabus entitled "Basic Studio Television Production" also appears in Vol. 3, No. 5 of the Newsletter. Copies may be secured by contacting Ann Martin, Curriculum Coordinator, The American Film Institute, John F. Kennedy Center, Washington, D.C. 20566.

[3] Brinkley, Don. "Girl from Bedlam," a Medical Center episode written January 8, 1974, p. 14.

INT. WARD CORRIDOR - AT NURSES' STATION - DAY

WILCOX is at her desk. The elevator doors open.

Gannon steps out, carrying an envelope. He crosses to the nurses' station.

WILCOX (looks up)
Hi, Doctor.

GANNON
Wilcox, I'm starting my vacation today...

WILCOX (surprised)
Oh? How long will you be gone?

GANNON
About two weeks. Dr. Wycoff will be taking over for me...
(refers to envelope)
I'd like to leave this with you -- for Dr. Lochner. But don't give it to him until next Friday.

WILCOX (uncertain)
Next Friday...?

GANNON (smiles)
It's the address where I'll be staying. I may not have any transportation, and I may need him to come and get me.
(confidentially)
But I don't want anyone to know where I am for at least a week. That way, I won't be called back. Dig?

WILCOX
I dig. Have fun, Doctor. Don't worry about a thing.

He walks off, she calls after him:

WILCOX (cont'd)
And drop me a card! I love getting mail from glamorous places!

She puts the envelope on her desk, as we:

CUT TO:

Taken from "Girl from Bedlam", a Medical Center episode written by Don Brinkley, January 8, 1974, pp. 13-14.